

Is Equality an Outdated Concern in Education?

SADHNA SAXENA

The central government policy of setting up residential schools for the dropout girls in educationally backward blocks through the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya scheme has generally been hailed by educationists. This paper critically examines the scheme and its implementation from the equality and justice perspectives. It argues that the equal educational opportunity doctrine, a state commitment in the 1960s, was abandoned with the National Policy on Education 1986, which resulted in a multilayered, inequalitarian school system for subordinate communities. Are schemes like the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, which tend to privilege a minuscule number of school dropouts, a subversion of the equality principle, privileging a few over the majority?

In the post-Independence period, girls' and women's education received much-needed comprehensive attention in the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 (Poonacha and Gopal 2004; National Focus Group 2007b). The persistent unequal participation of girls in schools, the pressure of rising women's awareness and movements in India and international compulsions and commitments compelled national and the state governments to formulate compensatory schemes for enhancing girls' participation in education. Some of these schemes cover all girls while others target girls of disadvantaged communities only. Such schemes may seem in contradiction to the equal educational opportunity and the meritocracy principle or doctrine that the 1966 Kothari Commission, and NPE 1986 had affirmed. However, as "social classes do not come to the market as equals" (Halsey et al 1997: 257), mere equal educational opportunities do not ensure a level playing field. Compensatory policy decisions seem necessary for the pursuit of equality and justice. Such decisions are "grounded in an awareness of deep-rooted inequalities and injustices...stem from a history of oppression" (Velaskar 2010: 63). It is generally accepted that in a society like India, which is patriarchal and stratified on caste, class, religious and ethnic basis, girls especially those from the subordinated groups, would require compensatory measures for inclusion in formal education.

Briefly, the present compensatory schemes include distribution of free uniform and textbooks to all the girls up to elementary levels, various scholarships on a merit basis up to the secondary and higher secondary levels and special scholarships for all scheduled caste (sc) and scheduled tribe (st) girls. Additionally, there is mid-day meal scheme and free schooling up to elementary levels for all children. Madhya Pradesh and Bihar have been providing bicycles to sc and st girls who have to travel long distances for their next level of schooling.

Delhi state has also introduced a conditional cash transfer scheme called Ladli Yojna for the girls from below poverty line (BPL) families. A fixed cash amount is deposited annually in the girl's bank account. This scheme has been introduced to encourage higher education among girls and the amount is given on completion of schooling after the girl is 18 years old. In addition to all these schemes, the state governments also run hostels for sc and st girls and boys.

The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) which aim to offer quality education to girls from sc, st, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minority and BPL communities of the educationally backward blocks (EBB) also comprise a significant central government scheme has and have generally been appreciated and hailed by educationists. The scheme was launched in 2004

Sadhna Saxena (sadhna1954@gmail.com) teaches at the Faculty of Education, University of Delhi.

and has been expanded to more than 3,000 blocks so far. The need for such a scheme has been justified on the basis of the lack of participation of girls from these communities in education, reflected in the below national average female literacy rates, high dropout rates and higher gender literacy gaps. However, since the scheme is only for EBB, and for not more than 100 girls per block within EBB, it raises concerns about the impact on the larger issue of low participation of girls in education at the national levels.

Policy Formulation and Translation

These state policies could be analysed from two perspectives: the implementation perspective, which is the transaction of policy at the field level, and by looking at the policy itself in a larger context. Drawing a distinction between policy formulation and actual “translation” at the ground level, Ball (Mainardes and Marcondes 2009) describes the negotiation from the “word” mode to the “action” mode, which is another level of policy analysis.

Velaskar (2010) on the other hand, emphasises inadequacies in the field of policy research, which is largely confined to examining policy implementation and measuring its effects in terms of goals and targets set by the policymaker and financier, in other words, by the state. Typically, conventional policy research in India rarely engages with the articulation of the problem in the policy, the nature of the state, the political context and the policy framework as such. As Velaskar argues, policy discourses and processes are deeply political phenomena, “and hence the production of policy must be located within the dynamics of social structural power relations in specific historical contexts” (Olssen et al 2004, as quoted in Velaskar 2010: 60). This paper reviews the KGBV scheme, an important compensatory policy intervention from the above two perspectives – the translation of the policy and in the larger educational context, a critical engagement with the policy itself.

Based on the Government of India (GOI) commissioned national evaluation reports (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan 2007, 2008b), a state-level United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2010) study, direct observation of KGBVs, and other writings on the subject; the first part of the paper provides an insight into the translation of policy. It includes a review of the infrastructure and other facilities such as human resources, the process for the selection of students, their positive experiences, alienation and problems of adjustment due to the clash of world views between the middle-class functionaries and girls’ own lives, quality of teaching and learning, working conditions of residential teachers, issues related to their autonomy and their relationship with local authorities, etc. Also, the review underlines the need for deeper insight into classroom transactions, teachers’ academic preparedness and learning outcomes, given the quality thrust of the scheme.

The second part of the paper reviews the contribution of this policy towards equality and equity within the context of debates on equal educational opportunity and substantive equality. This section briefly notes the debates on the dialectical relationship between education and social change and argues

that such schemes further confirm the abandonment of equal educational opportunity, thus weakening the justice goal. It seeks to engage with questions such as the following: What has been the nature of policy shift in the last five-six decades, from the policy doctrine of equal educational opportunity and compensatory measures to special schemes for a few? Why have KGBV-type minimalist policy interventions not provoked discussion about the government sidestepping its proclaimed and much-publicised aim of providing quality schooling to all the children? Why are facilities in all state-run schools, where the majority of girls go, not at par either with the Navodaya Vidyalayas or model schools or KGBV schools? Most importantly, does the focus on and visibility of such special schemes camouflage the appalling condition of the majority of government schools?

1 Policy Implementation

The policy of opening residential schools and hostels has always been perceived as a solution to unequal access for potential rural students residing in remote areas. State tribal and social welfare (now social justice) departments run ashram *shalas* (residential schools) and sc/st hostels for children of these communities. Various sc/st commissions, committee reports and research studies have provided crucial insight into the functioning of these schools and hostels. Detailed observations of ashram schools document the appalling living conditions, bad management, inefficiency, nepotism, corruption, and poor standards of education. The hostels are also afflicted by similar problems including overcrowding, unhygienic living conditions, poor quality of food, prevalence of diseases, malnourishment and absence of medical facilities for the residents (National Focus Group 2007a).

The UNICEF (2010) abridged report, based on a study of the status of girls’ education in Madhya Pradesh also documents lack of decent living conditions in seven randomly selected girls’ sc/st hostels. The detailed report on the above study, Saxena et al (2009) reports that all the seven hostels had acute problems of overcrowding, dilapidated buildings, complete absence of sanitation, security and medical care. There were no proper cooking facilities and the quality of food was bad and quantity woefully inadequate. The abysmally low paid hostel staffs indulged in pilferage that further deteriorated the quality of food and other facilities. In almost all the seven hostels, there were 50-100 girls residing in one or two small rooms with leaking roofs, with only two or three shared bathrooms and toilets, without water and electricity. For example, in one of the hostels, the study reported that (Saxena et al 2009: 158):

The roof of the building leaks and girls are protected only by tarpaulin during monsoons. There were buckets all over the room to collect rainwater from the leaking roof. There was only one bathroom for 100 girls. Since the hostel doesn’t have a boundary wall, drunken men often enter the hostel, abuse the girls and ask for money.

In another hostel (Saxena et al 2009: 158):

For 77 girls, there was only one room. It was a dark and dingy room with girls’ luggage, mattresses, pillows and sheets scattered all over. The room had one bulb and one fan. ... These girls were from 7 villages

located 3-7 km away, all of them were from BPL families and belonged to ST, SC and OBC categories...There were only two functional latrines and two bathrooms...

Ironically, many reports and studies have also documented that these hostels are in demand due to the shortage and inaccessibility of schools. However, the appalling living conditions are un conducive for a learning environment, defeating the very purpose.

Against this backdrop, KGBV, a flagship scheme of the GoI, is perhaps a refreshing and welcome idea. Though the scheme was launched in 2004, in 2007, it was included in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) programme as a separate component. The scheme claims to offer a second chance for mainstreaming rural girls from deprived backgrounds, in particular those who could not continue their education beyond class five or dropped out even earlier, and require extra academic support to return to formal education. Under this scheme, such girls are enrolled in class six and offered bridging courses to cope with the academic requirements of that class. The central government bears all the expenses for setting up and running the KGBVs, including living and educational expenses of students up to class eight.

There are three models for KGBVs – hostel cum school for 100 girls (Model I), hostel cum school for 50 girls (Model II) and hostel for 50 girls with teaching arrangements in a nearby middle school (Model III). The scheme provides for opening one school per selected block. The block selection is based on backwardness in terms of education indicators like below national level female literacy rates and adverse female school dropout rates.

Funds are provided for the construction of the building and other infrastructure, furniture for classrooms, office, library and living rooms including pillows, mattresses, sheets and blankets, kitchen equipment including refrigerator, utensils, cookers, gas stoves, storage vessels, and for clothes, stationary and books for all the residents. Compared to ordinary government schools and SC/ST hostels, KGBV schools are much better endowed though they are not at par with the Navodaya Vidyalayas. Kumar and Gupta (2008) are critical of KGBVs' secondary status compared to Navodaya Vidyalayas in terms of budgetary allocations, and express concern about the curriculum, content, pedagogy and the status of teachers appointed in KGBVs.

Infrastructure and Other Resources

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)-commissioned national evaluation reports (SSA 2007, 2008b) on the KGBV scheme, based on field visits to 12 states, are very informative. Though the reports seem laudatory and have commented only on the implementation aspects, without reflecting on the policy, they do throw light on the functioning of these institutions and underline the unevenness in operationalisation on the ground. The reports document issues regarding resources, facilities and infrastructure, that is living conditions and learning ambience, that range from excellent to appalling. For example, there are KGBVs with inadequate space for sleeping, cooking and teaching. The study records that sometimes three classes are held in the same room; girls

sleep on the floor as either there are no beds or no space to keep beds. There is a shortage of bathrooms, toilets and water is reported from almost every KGBV, except Punjab.

The reports also document the problem of girls' alienation, homesickness, breakdowns, hysteria and isolation. On the health front, the reports are disconcerting to say the least. During the visits, many girls were found to be suffering from scabies (skin) and gastrointestinal diseases due to shortage of space and water, unhygienic living conditions, and lack of nutritious food. The situation was worsened because most KGBVs lack access to adequate medical and security facilities.

These reports also discuss issues related to lack of warden autonomy, routine teaching methods, untrained or inadequately trained teachers and reinforcement of gender stereotypes through extracurricular activities like sewing, pickle-making, embroidery, tailoring, etc. Some of the reports have recorded evidence of the strengthening of gender stereotypes and Hinduisation through recitation of mantras before meals in some of the KGBVs.

The Madhya Pradesh UNICEF report (Saxena et al 2009) documented the experience of five randomly selected KGBVs across five districts. *Sanchalan Nirdesh 2007-08*,¹ the government guidelines for running KGBVs in Madhya Pradesh, have laid down elaborate preconditions for opening a KGBV. These include close access to medical facilities, adequate residential facilities with electricity for all the residents, including separate facilities for the hostel staff, at least four bathrooms and four toilets for the girls, tank for storing water and motor and pump for lifting water, library, telephone, computers, internet connection, laboratory and sports materials, provision of beds, mattresses, sheets, blankets, clothes, sweaters, towels, undergarments, sleepers, comb, school bags, books, stationary, etc, for every girl.

However, shockingly, the learning ambience and living conditions in these KGBVs were not very different from the SC/ST hostels in the state. The KGBVs were located either in panchayat bhawans or in dilapidated school buildings with broken doors and leaking roofs or in small dingy rented rooms. All these buildings were without ventilation, adequate sanitary facilities and security staff. Contrary to the guidelines, none had regular water supply, electricity and access to medical facilities. Acute shortage of basic facilities like water, toilets and bathrooms forced girls to either bathe only once in a while or for four to five girls to bathe together or bathe in the open. For defecation, they had to use an open drain (nala). In all the KGBVs, 50-100 girls managed in two-three small rooms, without any arrangements for keeping their belongings, including their study materials. All such items were either scattered or piled up on one table in most of the KGBVs. Due to shortage of space, the same rooms are used for dining, for holding classes and sleeping. Either there were only a few cots, forcing two-three girls to share one cot or there were none, forcing girls to sleep on floor. The following excerpts from two KGBVs perhaps sum up the fate of the residents (Saxena et al 2009: 154):

For 88 girls, there were only two toilets with attached bathrooms. The doors were broken and rugs were tied for privacy. There was no

sweeper and therefore the toilets were never cleaned. Even the bathing space and the space between the two bathrooms was used as urinals.... The girls used open space for washing clothes and utensils and since there was no drainage, the dirty water collected there...There was a make-shift arrangement for the kitchen in the open...Due to acute water shortage water had to be purchased and so the girls were able to bathe only twice in a week even during summer months.

In another KGBV, the study reported that (Saxena et al 2009: 154):

There was no electricity. There were four bathrooms and toilets, but without any taps. There were no beds or mattresses for the girls and so they had to sleep on floor even during rainy season, under leaking roof. There was water logging in the playground where scorpions were found. One girl was bitten by a scorpion and the warden called a tantric for Jhad-phoonk.

Interestingly, based on government guidelines, better buildings were constructed for all seven KGBVs but these were not handed over to them due to the wrangling between the public works department (PWD) and the education department. In the meanwhile, the condition of some of these buildings has deteriorated beyond repair.

Contrary to this, both the KGBVs in Rajasthan had excellent infrastructure with beautiful campuses, with segregated and well-demarcated spaces for residential blocks, classrooms, library, kitchen, dining room, warden and other staff's residence, etc. These too, however, did not ensure quality education. There were serious problems with the selection procedures. This and other related issues are discussed in the latter part of the paper.

Emoluments for Teachers and Other Staff

Despite the commendable objectives of the KGBVs, "to ensure access and quality education to the girls of disadvantaged groups of society" (SSA 2008a:1), it is clear from the national evaluation reports (SSA 2007, 2008b), Saxena et al (2009) and Saxena (2011) that across states, the teachers, the main providers of quality education, and the non-teaching staff of KGBVs are paid pittance for their services, violating even the minimum wage rules. Even this low wages/honorarium is not paid on time as the national evaluation report and Madhya Pradesh study records. In some of the KGBVs, teachers and other staff was not paid for months.

All the above documents as well as Kumar and Gupta (2008) and Fifteenth Joint Review Mission (JRM) report 2012 express serious concern about the teachers' low emoluments (SSA 2012). Yet, curiously, the case of KGBV teachers has never been discussed in the context of the larger reality of changing teacher recruitment policies across states. In fact, in the last two decades, under neo-liberal conditionalities, many states in India have been employing contractual teachers on a large scale against permanent posts. By not locating the status of teachers in a KGBV in the larger context of World Bank conditionalities (Welmond 2002), not problematising this in the context of the increasing thrust on privatisation and demonising of teachers and breaking up of their unions in anticipation of possible stiff resistance (Ayers and Ayers 2011) and ignoring the international discourse (Brown et al 1997; Whitty 1997), an immense disservice to the teaching profession is being done.

The recent large-scale protests by contract teachers who were lathi-charged in Chhattisgarh (covered by ETV Chhattisgarh channel on 5 November 2011) and in Punjab (covered by NDTV on 5 December 2011)² highlight the grim reality of the service conditions of KGBV teachers across states. There has been enough evidence of turmoil in this sector for the past two decades, which rarely draws the kind of attention it deserves (Saxena and Mahendroo 2004).

In accordance with this policy, the KGBVs wardens, with round the clock duty hours and posts equivalent to head of middle school, are surviving on meagre salaries of Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,000 per month, on contract basis! The wardens of both KGBVs of Rajasthan were paid much higher emoluments, Rs 9,000 per month, yet this was still far lower than the regular salary. Both these wardens said that their contracts may not be renewed and they may have to leave soon after having worked hard in establishing these institutions, even at the cost of neglecting their own families. They wondered if it was at all worthwhile to invest so much energy in setting up institutions that did not offer any job security or continuity.

Incidentally, the warden is the highest paid employee of KGBVs. The cooks and watchmen are paid between Rs 1,500 and Rs 2,500 a month! In the name of providing opportunity to girls of the subjugated groups, these professionals are facing the worst kind of inequality.

Quality of Education

More importantly, there is no evidence that these KGBVs are providing quality education. The lack of thrust on academic aspects at policy levels is evident from the low or no priority given to teachers' professional development to help them handle the multiple academic challenges that they encounter. The greatest challenge is to bring the girls, who left school a few years ago, up to class six level through a bridge course. Sometimes, the girls who come to KGBV have forgotten even the basic literacy skills, according to the National Evaluation Report.

These reports and other documents that have been referred to have expressed serious concern about the curriculum, books and the routine pedagogy followed in the classrooms. Even excellent infrastructure and dedicated teachers and wardens could not ensure better teaching in the Rajasthan KGBVs. The class observations in the two KGBVs in Rajasthan clearly showed the teachers' lack of academic competence as they were not able to handle classes six to eight social science, science and mathematics. They also seemed unsure while handling girls who had forgotten even their basic literacy skills. These preliminary observations clearly underline the urgent need for a systematic review of the teaching and learning processes in KGBVs.

The Neo-liberal Context, Patriarchy and Alienation

The scheme has also generated a debate regarding efforts that amount to state surveillance of girls of subordinated classes. There is silence on the critical interrogation of linkages between the increased attention towards girls' enrolment and schooling and neo-liberal economic policies and their impact

on land and livelihood issues, and the “oppressive social and economic hierarchies that these children’s communities inhabit” (Balagopalan 2010: 297). Issues such as the alienation of girls from their communities, the imposition of middle-class values at the cost of undermining their own values, the focus on gendered life skills rather than on liberal education, etc, has also been a cause for serious concern amongst some of the educationists. Commenting on KGBV scheme, Balagopalan (2010) is also critical of the fact that the state constructs children as easily isolatable from the poverty of their families and communities and shifts the blame of their not attending schools on the family and traditions of communities, thus signalling the “progressive nature of its efforts” (p 299).

The state, obviously, cannot be allowed such an escape. However, the family’s and community’s role as upholders of patriarchal values that obstruct girls’ education also need not be overlooked. Girls enjoy living in hostels as this opportunity is perceived as an escape from the oppressive family and community patriarchy but they also feel alienated and homesick. Several government and non-government reports on education also claim that access to education raises the age of marriage. However, helping them avoid child marriage does not necessarily empower girls to challenge the authority and structures of inequality. Also, there is little knowledge about which new “patriarchies” the girls encounter in hostels. In all probability, one kind of authority is replaced by newer forms. Therefore, alienation, isolation, freedom and newer forms of patriarchal control constitute the complex reality of the girls residing in hostels. Have KGBV institutional processes been able to challenge or even acknowledge these structures of authority that are responsible for persisting gender inequality? That is the moot question that demands critical interrogation.

Selection Criteria or Their Absence

Looking at the residential and other facilities (not necessarily the quality of teaching) at this KGBV, many parents said that they would also like to send their daughters there, but have no idea who gets selected and how (Saxena 2011).³

Of the 9,245 girls enrolled in KGBV hostels in MP, only 57 were from the Muslim community due to the bias community faces (UNICEF 2010: 58).

The national evaluation report also expresses deep concern about the bias in the selection process. The reports record that in most districts where the fieldwork was conducted, there seemed no way of reaching out to the out-of-school girls and there was little effort to include girls from dalit, minority and BPL categories. In many of the KGBVs, girls were either from the same or the nearby villages. Many were not even school dropouts, but regular students.

Most importantly, there were very few minority and BPL students and in many KGBVs, there were few SC/ST students, disproportionate to their percentage in general population. For example, in one block where the KGBV is being run by a Christian non-governmental organisation (NGO), there were only Christian girls. Similarly, in both the KGBVs of Rajasthan, there were only ST girls though there were SC and minority

populations in both blocks. Wardens of both KGBVs were evasive about the selection process and after much prodding, said that girls are selected through awareness campaigns. On being asked how and by whom these campaigns were organised and how people from remote tribal areas came to know about these, the wardens did not offer any direct reply. However, they gave indications of their complete lack of autonomy, and the block education officers’ total control over every decision, including selection of girls. Barring a few exceptions, girls in these two KGBVs were also from nearby villages. Given the policy of privileging and planning for a small percentage of girls per block, at the cost of excluding the majority living under similar conditions, the selection process is bound to be non-transparent.

NGO vs Government

Finally, according to the JRM 2012 (SSA 2012: A11), there are about 3,435 running KGBVs and total enrolment is about 3.18 lakh. The JRM 2012 report also appreciated the efforts of CARE and Mahila Samakhya in running the KGBVs in some of the states. While the UNICEF (2010) documents the miserable living conditions and learning environment in the five randomly selected KGBVs of MP, all run by the MP education department under SSA, Saxena (2011) discusses the excellent physical infrastructure and other facilities in the KGBVs of two blocks in Rajasthan run by NGOs. The national evaluation report also gives indications that NGO-run KGBVs have better infrastructure.

All of this may not constitute adequate evidence to arrive at the general conclusion that NGO-run KGBVs are better managed but all the same there are indications to suggest that. Does this mean that the government department is not competent to run such institutes? According to KGBV guidelines (ssa 2008a: 2), there is a provision for corporate groups to adopt these residential schools, for which separate guidelines are to be issued. Considering the fact that such initiatives have serious implications for the government school system, a thorough discussion is warranted, but that is beyond the scope of the present paper.

2 KGBV and Inequality

There are two issues that are looked at in this section. The possible implications of the KGBV scheme on the equality agenda is the first issue that is discussed from the perspective of the dialectical relationship between school education and social transformation. The second issue entails examining the emergence of the KGBV type of scheme within the framework of the history of education and major policy deviations in the last five decades. In this context, the KGBV goals, as reflected in the guidelines, are also analysed.

Education and Social Transformation

Equality of educational access – through expansion, equal opportunity and positive discrimination – and the possibility of achieving social equality through education have been issues of sociological engagement from the middle of the 20th century (Karabel and Halsey 1977; Shukla and Kumar 1985; Velaskar 2010). In this context, the fundamental issue of whether

education is a potent tool to challenge and change structural inequalities, or if it can only reproduce and strengthen the dominant ideologies and social and economic inequalities, has also been intensely debated. According to Halsey (1985: 82) “a society of equals has to be created by economic and political reform and that the role of education must largely be to maintain such a society once it has been attained”.

But does this imply that in modern times, schools can be ignored in struggles for equality? In Karabel and Halsey (1977), there is discussion of the 1972 *Inequality* report by Christopher Jencks. They agreed with Jencks that the economy is the key arena of struggle but also emphasised that

[S]chools do not turn ‘inputs’ into ‘outputs’ but instead shape the personalities who pass through them; therefore, the report is, ‘mechanistic rather than dialectical in its relegation of schools to marginality’ (1977: 26).

Commenting further on the report they said:

Though it brilliantly demolished the peculiarly American myth that school reform can serve as a substitute for more fundamental social change, *Inequality* may unfortunately have replaced it with another equally destructive myth: that a viable strategy for social equality can afford to ignore the schools (ibid).

The emergence of critical and conflict theories that challenged the mere reproductive role of education further emphasised the complex but critical relationship between social change and education.

However, abandonment of the equal educational opportunity along with compensatory measures may subvert any potential of social change through education. A universal demand for quality for all may gradually be replaced with competition for getting entry into the special schools. Thus KGBVs, on the one hand, divide the children of the deprived and subordinated groups into KGBV and non-KGBV groups. But the scheme also introduces another level of opacity by subverting the selection process, as discussed in the policy implementation section. By introducing competition and divisions, instead of addressing the quality concerns of all the children, the link between education and struggle for justice may be seriously endangered.

Displacing Equal Educational Opportunity

The Constitution of Independent India was rooted in liberal ideology and committed to the values of liberty, justice and equality. In the context of education, this meant following the principle of equal educational opportunity for all and additional compensatory measures for communities that were historically oppressed and exploited. As stated in the beginning, the basis for such state action was rooted in the recognition of the deep injustices and inequalities that these communities faced for generations, due to which they enter the education system with multiple inequalities and disadvantages.

However, despite Constitutional Directives for educating all children up to the age of 14 and special care for children of the weaker sections, in concrete terms, elementary education remained a neglected area till the Education Commission (EC) was constituted in 1964. To accomplish the vision of equal

educational opportunity, a two-pronged strategy was recommended: massive expansion of state-run free lower primary and upper primary schools and the establishment of a common school system.

Interestingly, although there was an overt endorsement, the actual translation of this vision of the EC, especially the common school system, into policy and action met with stiff resistance from the upper-caste and class leadership. The only acceptable form of equal educational opportunity was a free, state-run system of elementary education and its expansion. Further cementing the two-tier system, what emerged were government-run free schools for the subordinated people and an elite private system for the powerful. Due to non-allocation of adequate resources for elementary education, the expansion was inadequate in numbers and quality. Therefore, with limited and declining budgetary allocations, in a vast and unevenly developing country like India, the expansion of the state-run free school system also took widely divergent path resulting in inequality, imbalance and inadequate expansion (Velaskar 2010).

The beginning of liberalisation in education, in the context of the opening of the Indian economy, started with the NPE 1986 which laid the ground for external dependence. Its thrust towards privatisation, inadequate allocation of resources for expansion and opening of Navodaya Vidyalayas for the rural elite resulted in further stratification of the government school system making it more inegalitarian and multilayered. The unequal and parallel system created for the adivasis, dalits, and the children of the migrants populations and people living in rural areas included setting up of alternative schools and the revival of much discredited non-formal education centres as the expansion strategy, further exacerbating inequality. The NPE 1986 policy was the beginning of the abandonment of equal educational opportunity, one of the main strategies for achieving equality and justice through education, argues Velaskar (2010). Further, schemes for the establishment of the model district schools for nurturing the talent of rural disadvantaged children meant that “quality for some” gained precedence over “quality for all”, in line with the demands of the rural elite (Kumar 1985).

With the downsizing of the welfare state and the focus on markets in India in the 1990s, the Indian state collaborated with international funding agencies who changed the political economy of education. The government implemented education reforms that followed the conditions laid down by global actors. The decade was marked by the launch of a new World Bank-funded programme of elementary education called the district primary education programme (DPEP), which further marginalised the equal opportunity agenda in terms of its objectives. The DPEP guidelines, a very carefully worded GOI publication, clearly stated that the DPEP was the “operationalisation of NPE 1986” based on “national experience”. It was a time-bound (five-years) specific intervention programme. The programme aimed to reduce dropout rate and gender disparity in achievement and enrolment but was not committed to creation of equal educational opportunity and did not aim for universalisation (Kumar et al 2001).

Post-DPEP, the inequalitarian school system has been further stratified by creating more layers of schools including education guarantee schools, budget private schools, and in the name of quality, district-level model schools and KGBVs for a chosen few, as opposed to expanding quality government schools for all the children. There is also a further policy thrust on promoting privatisation through public-private partnerships and voucher system in the name of choice (Saxena 2010). Commenting on these developments, Velaskar (2010) writes that with a rise in the number of substandard schools, access may have gone up but the experience of meaningful learning has gone down for disadvantaged people.

Clearly, over the past six decades, the doctrine of equal educational opportunity and compensatory measures for marginalised communities has been replaced by a multilayered, inequalitarian school system, and increase in resource-starved government schools in addition to special schemes that are based on the principle of exclusion of most children. A clear subversion of the constitutional commitment to equality and justice is evident here.

The KGBV scheme is an illusionary measure that tries to cover up such policy subversions by expressing concern about girls' education and the rhetoric of quality.

More importantly, it is illusionary because special attention for a few is disguised by statements on the general problem of quality and participation of all girls. These efforts, too, remain minimal. The implementation clearly shows that there is a world of difference between the "word" mode and the "action" mode.

KGBV Guidelines

The KGBV guidelines are an acknowledgement of two problems. First, there are areas where a large number of girls are out of school: "there remain significant gaps in the enrolment of girls at the elementary level as compared to boys, especially at the upper primary levels" (SSA 2008a: 1). And second, "gender disparities still persist in rural areas and among disadvantaged communities" (SSA 2008a: 1). The guidelines also emphasise that the objective of KGBV is "to ensure access and quality education to the girls of disadvantaged groups of society by setting up residential schools with boarding facilities at elementary level".

The objective seems to voice concern for all girls from educationally backward blocks, not a select few, though the policy of opening KGBVs in selected blocks and only for 50-100 girls per block belie such a hope. There seems no convincing rationale or logic behind formulating a scheme privileging a chosen few over thousands of out of school girls. For instance, according to the block education officer's report, the number of school dropout girls at the elementary levels in Jhadol block of Rajasthan that boasts of one well-equipped KGBV was 6,336 in the year 2009-10 (Saxena 2011).

Similarly, the detailed state-level evaluation reports, on which the national evaluation reports (2007, 2008) are based, record that Bankura district of West Bengal has 13 blocks. Even if each block has a Model I KGBV, not more than 1,300 girls could be enrolled in these. The number of school dropout girls

in the district was 19,693 in the year 2006-07. Similarly, Purulia district with 20 blocks had 39,711 dropout girls. In the 15 educationally backward blocks of the eight districts of Assam, there were 11,162 dropout girls in 2006-07. Assam had adopted Model II of KGBV and under the best of circumstances there could not have been more than 750 girls in these KGBVs.

With such staggering numbers and limited seats, the selection process is bound to be non-transparent and bring added distortions in the pursuit of equality. In reality, the KGBV is not a scheme that is trying to make the government system egalitarian and accountable. KGBVs are actually meant for privileging a few and ignoring the rest, the majority of the girls from the communities it proclaims to benefit. Can exclusivity and equality go hand in hand? Is not the policy itself exacerbating inequality amongst the deprived? Do not such schemes turn the equality in education debate on its head and instead encourage inequalitarianism, competition and exclusivity amongst these communities?

Unlike Navodaya Vidyalayas, the privileging here is not even based on "merit", which too is problematic. Instead in all probability, it is based on patronage. The visibility and glamour for a few poor girls, who constitute a small fraction of the total number of out of school girls with access to hostels, clean environment, and "quality education" obfuscates the issue of equal educational opportunity by rendering the majority of the dropout girls invisible. It is time that educationists see beyond the glamour of all such schemes that cater to a minuscule population of the disadvantaged and demand expansion, better facilities and quality education in all the government schools.

As discussed above, the relationship between education and social justice or substantive equality is a complex one. Therefore, it is important to understand how inadequate educational opportunities further erode the possibility of equality and justice.

Conclusions

When there is a policy that addresses the quality and access concern of a select few, excluding the majority, there are bound to be distortions. For quality improvement in schools, one cannot depend on selective criteria because they tend to take the focus away from the general state of affairs. Does that mean that in principle, the state should never be formulating the schemes for setting up "model schools"? The answer is "yes" and "no", depending on the long-term goals. If such schools are run with the objective of experimenting with innovative ideas and based on experience, mainstreaming these ideas, then may be, yes. No, if the objective is to run a few quality schools based on the principle of exclusion, which diffuses the larger reality.

Additionally, the struggle for demanding quality government schools with adequate infrastructure and qualified teachers for all has to be relentless and such starry policies/schemes diffuse the focus. Otherwise, there is the danger of a patronising narrative of at least some children receiving access to better facilities, overtaking the rights discourse.

NOTES

- 1 See "Kasturba Gandhi Sanchalan Nirdesh Varsh 2007-08" by the Rajya Shiksha Kendra, Bhopal.
- 2 During a protest march in Mukhtsar district by contractual teachers for regularisation of their services a woman teacher, Barinder Pal Kaur from Bhatinda district, was slapped by a male sarpanch of the ruling Akali Dal.
- 3 Saxena (2011) is an unpublished report based on the study of two KGBVs in Rajasthan in September 2011. This small study was facilitated by the Udaipur-based organisation Seva Mandir.

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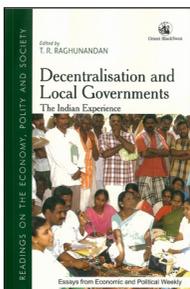
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